

America, A Dangerous Democracy?

When discussing the inherent dangers of a democracy some trenchant thought has to be given towards defining it, exploring its objectives and rendering judgment. Governments of the people, by the people and for the people can be a cover for the majority to impose their will to deny freedom legislated by law. The Bill of Rights, a pillar of the foundation of American democracy, allows for no transgressions of the rights of the individual. Sadly, its efficacy is often questioned and trampled upon. Tyrannical democracies believe that they have the right to impose their rule on others simply because they were chosen by the free will of the electorate. However, no electorate has ever completely constituted the government and so is evil made real. The father of American democracy Alexis de Tocqueville worried that the state's power would end up concentrated in a single authority until its citizens were "reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd."¹ Tocqueville stated in no uncertain terms "I do not know if the people of the United States would vote for superior men if they ran for office, but there can be no doubt that such men do not run."² While the America he wrote about was of a previous time, the concerns are as relevant now. Tocqueville feared the majority would trample on minorities. The author is correct when he claims that men and women at the helm of democratic governments are by nature incompetent. He attributes the fact to the burden of democracies to lift the standard of living of the oppressed. In promoting only the rights of the injured, a democratic government implies that the ablest would be removed from authority. He was concerned burdens would result in a tyranny of opinion. Tocqueville felt this to be a permanent impression of America, a

country with "less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than of any other he had encountered."³ For a world to be based on law routine forays into the civil liberties of individuals is a red flag indicating that the government has been taken over by tyrants. Civil liberty organizations are not equipped to take care of governmental excesses as their goal to prevent illegal search and seizure of property is difficult to establish. The most well-known chapter in American democracy is its government of checks and balances. During its infancy few worried about attacks on the liberty of individuals. Crimes are committed when laws are flouted. Democracies as envisioned by Tocqueville will be rid of evil as they would not only cater to the needs of the oppressed but also apply salve to the general population.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville. "http://quotes.liberty-ree.ca/quote/alexis_de_tocqueville_quote_664a HYPERLINK "http://quotes.liberty-ree.ca/quote/alexis_de_tocqueville_quote_664a". "

2. Ibid. " <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/90454-de-la-democratie-en-amerique>."

3. Ibid. *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.)

One reason for the continued popularity of the book *Democracy in America* is that despite misgivings Tocqueville was optimistic about democracy. He knew the kind of equality that had taken hold in America could result in tyranny but he also believed that it gave people a taste for freedom which would lead them to resist tyranny. Equality he noted "insinuates deep into the

heart and mind of every man some vague notion and some instinctive inclination toward political freedom thereby preparing the antidote for the ill which it has produced."⁴ To render final judgment on democracy the concept of radicalism may be seen as a lasting solution. A definition of radicalism is that it is a way of thinking or behaving based on the belief that important political or social changes are needed. To this end the behavior of citizens has haunted even the mighty. For change to take place should citizens revolt? Much of this point will be dependent upon the values of individuals. In the pamphlet *Common Sense*⁵, the American radical Thomas Paine argued that America's independence as a colony from Britain could not be established under British authority. The reasons for this belief were manifold. Man, Paine argued was born into a state of equality and the distinction that had arisen between the England and America was an unnatural one. *Common Sense*⁶ reflected this belief that America had evolved into a nation that no longer needed Britain's support. Paine was of the opinion that independence would be best served in a representative democracy. In particular, he was heavily invested in promoting radical thought. Paine admired British parliamentary opposition even as he worked to overthrow British rule. He supported an increasing radicalization of opinion especially on the fringes of government. Radicalism is the belief that the king's power is illegitimate. This belief advocates that those affected ought to have some say in how decisions are made. Paine used the precepts of *Common Sense*⁷ to successfully rebel against Britain's King. He showed that radicalism could not function without direct opposition to popular government and its authority.

Pride in American democracy lies in the division of political power into its legislative, judiciary and executive parts. Such governmental concessions have a lot to be admired. In

practice, however, the division has often deepened into a morass of back room deals and legislation. In order to stem the tide of decay much can be gleaned from the religious reform movements in Scotland and British North America. By examining the relationship between ecclesiastical and political action radicalism considers the ways in which "Presbyterian political theory and covenanting movements"⁸ could be used for reform. In a similar way "levellers have also constituted radical thinking".⁹

4. www.anglonauts.com/history/hist_2006/hist.../hist_2006_us_pol.htm.

5. Thomas Paine. *Common Sense* (Philadelphia: Bartleby.com, 1999.)

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Valerie Wallace. "Exporting Radicalism within the Empire : Scots Presbyterian Political Values in Scotland and British North America, C.1815-c.1850" (United Kingdom: University of Glasgow, 2010.)

9. <http://www.levellers.org/lev.htm>.

The philosopher Hegel's warning to differentiate the object of study, democracy from its background, the rulers is a night in which "all cows are black."¹⁰ American radicals may be celebrated but the success of any revolt lies in the ability to reign in power even its own. Democracies without restraint are as dangerous as any other political form of government be

they libertarian, authoritarian or dictatorship. Paine and Tocqueville have provided documents from which anyone can draw inspiration as they point to the promise of equality within the boundaries of law; a democracy of the people, for the people and by the people.

10. Yirmiyahu, Yovel. *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.)

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